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Refleteren op stage-ervaringen

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Summary

In vocational education it is very important for students to receive part of their training in a real-life situation. Most of the Dutch vocational colleges organize a practical training in a work setting that is relevant to the students' chosen field of study. Through practical training, students can gain as much as a years' work experience. Students generally consider their practical training as an important contribution to their vocational education. There are however some difficulties involved, the most important being that students experience a gap between their traineeship and what they have been taught in school.

In the early 1980's, the effectiveness of practical training was researched and discussed. Quite a number of Dutch educational researchers argued that the effectiveness of a practical training was highly questionable as their research did not indicate adequately that expected learning results were being achieved. Students did not seem to reach the goals. This obviously ran contrary to the opinion of schools, students and most of the employers organisations.

Other educational researchers indicated that during practical training, students mainly learned social skills and only some specific vocational skills. One of the conclusions was that reflection on work experience may enhance the effectiveness of the practical training.

Reflection has been used in educational settings for social workers as a tool for developing the correct attitude and skills. During the last fifteen years, reflection techniques have been developed, used and researched in teacher education. Different educational settings and different ideas regarding 'good practice' resulted in a variety of definitions of reflection. The definition that was used for the project, focusses on the occupational requirements of social workers' education and is related to the aims of clinical supervision: Reflection is a mental activity, aimed at the investigation of one's action in a certain setting. Important aspects of the investigation are to clarify, to make more explicit and to integrate knowledge, skills, feelings, values and standards on which the action is based. The integration of knowledge, skills, feelings, values and standards in the performance, lead to a more professional attitude on the part of the social worker.

In 1984, the APS started a school improvement project which focussed on practical training in vocational education for various occupations in the social and health services (middelbaar dienstverlenings- en gezondheidszorgonderwijs: mdgo). The project was a specific follow-up of a school improvement project initiated by the government, in which 35 specific longer and shorter training schemes were converted into ten more general educational streams. The practical training had been a major concern: the practical training offered a year's work experience. At the same time however, students were also required to attend school for a certain amount of time: legislation requires that 20% of the practical training be used at school.

In the school improvement project a number of activities for practical training were developed together with the schools. The activities were based mainly on the use of systematic students' reflections on work experience. Students were required to come back to school for one day a week. The school provided a programme using the work experience as a guideline. During that day supervision sessions were scheduled as well.

The present study evaluates the school improvement project in two ways. Firstly, the activities that were organised by the schools are analysed and subsequently categorized according to the use of reflection techniques. The research part of the study focusses both on the learning results of the traineeship and on the effectiveness of the use of reflection.

Developing reflection-based activities in the school curriculum

The aim of the school improvement project was to develop teaching programmes and situations which would provide the students with opportunities for working with their work experiences. The assumption being that by relating directly to their work experience, students would be able to profit from what they learned in school as well. In this way and by using reflection as a tool to discuss the work experience, the gap between school and traineeship would be bridged.

Working with a model for reflection

A model for reflection was developed, based on notions from the field of clinical supervision and experiential learning. The model consists of five, generally accepted, steps: (1) work experience, (2) reflection, (3) analysis, (4) finding alternative solutions (5) new work experience.

Sixteen schools worked with the model. Several programmes were made for school learning (terugkomonderwijs); set tasks for the traineeship and

various forms of supervision. The 'tools' for the development were in one way or another used in the various training programmes underlying this new form of education. The schools that participated were mainly geared towards providing education for social workers (sociaal en cultureel werk). A questionnaire (response: 95%) which was sent to all schools involved, revealed that practically all of the schools used or partly used activities based on reflection during the year of traineeship.

The reflection model was used to formulate reflection criteria for the various activities organised. The programmes of the fifteen schools which participated in the evaluation research were analysed. Based on the analysis, schools were divided into four groups. The main distinctive feature being the way they organised the clinical supervision sessions:

- Ref1*: group supervision (4 students, 2 hour session, once every two weeks, guided by a supervisor, evaluation reports from every session, (written) input for the session prepared in advance).
- Ref2*: trainee supervision (small group), which differs from *ref1* because the sessions are organised every three or four weeks.
- Ref3*: trainee supervision (large group), has a larger group of students than group supervision: a maximum of 7 students participate.
- Ref4*: exchange of experience: this is a large group of students, generally some 20 students, who meet for one hour every week. Experiences are exchanged in a general sense. There are no guidelines regarding the evaluation or the input.

The sample

Fifteen schools were randomly sampled from a population of 52 schools for the evaluation research. Based on the questionnaire mentioned above the schools were categorized according to the categories mentioned above. Most of the schools were willing to participate. Due to internal changes, some schools had to be put into another category once the research had started. In this way *ref3* became the largest category. A check on previous schooling, age and sex revealed that the categories were compatible.

During the year of practical training, the overall programme of the schools was analysed by using a questionnaire for teachers and by conducting an extensive interview with the co-ordinator. One of the conclusions is that the schools within a category are not quite homogenous in the way they organize the other activities. However, all of the schools involved use reflection one way or another in the reported activities.

Evaluation

The evaluation research focussed on two questions:

1. What do students learn during their practical training and how do the results relate to the goals of traineeship?
2. How does the use of reflection affect learning: i.e. does the use of reflection produce better results during the year of practical training?

Four instruments were used for the evaluation: case studies used in the final exams, a standardized test for social skills, an open and a closed learner-report and a questionnaire.

What do students learn during their practical training

The research findings of the present study confirm the earlier research findings that students learn social skills and vocational skills. The vocational skills learned in the first half year of the practical training are the structured method of presenting activities to clients and the acquisition of a professional attitude. In the second half of the practical training, students focus more on the organisational aspects of the institute where they work and on their future as a professional worker.

According to the students the practical training itself contributed most to reaching the goals. Also, in the school curriculum, structured supervision and the pedagogical subjects enhance learning. It is very important however that the groups in structured supervision do not exceed 7 members and frequent meetings are required.

The effectiveness of activities based on reflection during practical training

The research results into the effect of reflection are not unanimous: sometimes the schools which provide the least reflection in their programme produce the best results. This may be due to the kind of instrument used. The results of some of the instruments indicate better results for schools which do provide reflection in their programme.

Schools which use the least reflection in their programme tend to have better scores on the case studies, which is an indication of the ability to combine theory and practice. Schools which have programmes with intensive reflection activities tend to have better scores on specific vocational skills and the development of a professional attitude. The research results indicate a close connection with the kind of supervision involved. *Ref1*, group supervision, and *Ref3*, trainees supervision, large group, are greatly appreciated by the students involved. These categories of schools tend to

produce better results when personal growth is at stake. *Ref2*, which theoretically gives as much opportunity for reflection as *Ref3*, sometimes produces the least results and is also not appreciated as much as *Ref1* and *Ref3* by the students. Apparently, the frequency of the meetings and consequently the opportunity for reflection is crucial for learning and for the appreciation of the students.

As far as the school programme is concerned, the research results indicate that it is very important that students get the opportunity to connect their work experience with the subject matter offered. Students value their being challenged to include their work experience into the programme, so that they can participate actively in what is going on.

Conclusion

The research results indicate that reflection is an important tool to reach the set goals for the practical training. However, the research only included schools which used reflection in their programme, be it in supervision or in the subject matter presented. A comparison between reflection and non-reflection could not be made. One of the schools in *Ref4*, the school is noted for its good results on the case studies, appears to be a conventional school with strict discipline.

Reflecting on the research design, the researchers question the value of case studies for the assessment of students' insight into the proper professional action to be taken in a specific work situation. The researchers feel that case studies tend to reveal the students' ability to use theory in a practical situation. To do this, reflection does not seem to be necessary. The inventory for social skills seems to indicate personal growth, as was described by the developers.

The learner-report proved valuable in measuring what students learn during their practical training. It did not prove to be a practical tool for measuring reflection skills. The analysis of diaries seems to be more appropriate for this end.

The students' questionnaire yielded important information which can be used for advising schools.

The schools that participated in the research were informed about the results in 1990. Other schools were informed in 1991. Most of the schools which used *Ref2* changed their method of supervision, as the method did not prove to be effective. Schools also are aware of the fact that a choice between the supervision method of *Ref1* and *Ref3* is easily made because

these seem to be equally effective. Besides, *Ref3* is cheaper for schools than *Ref1*, as *Ref1* uses smaller groups.

Schools are also advised to organize programmes which content is close to students' work experience, and in which the students can participate actively.

The education for social workers, which was researched in 1988/1989, was changed in 1993 and will be changed again in 1997. Programmes of which the content is largely the same. In the proposal for the 1997 programme, reflection still plays an important part. The research findings are therefore still applicable to the new situation.